

Message Text

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ACTION OC-06

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P R 211411Z AUG 76

FM AMEMBASSY BEIRUT

TO AMEMBASSY DAMASCUS PRIORITY

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E.O. 11652: N/A

TAGS: PFOR, SY, LE

SUBJECT: DAMASCUS-BEIRUT POUCH RUN, AUG 20, 1976

REF: BEIRUT 6993

1. TWO EMBASSY BEIRUT DRIVERS WHO MADE POUCH RUNS TO SYRIAN BORDER 20 AUG 1976 WERE DEBRIEFED BY ADMIN OFFICER AND RSO AND, ALTHOUGH THEY REPORTED SOME SPECIFIC PROBLEMS, BELIEVE THAT REGULAR RUN TO DAMASCUS FOR MAIL AND SUPPLIES IS FEASIBLE.

2. TWO EMBASSY BEIRUT VEHICLES DEPARTED BEIRUT 0830 AND ARRIVED AT SYRIAN BORDER (MASNAA) APPROXIMATELY 1130. EXCHANGE TOOK PLACE JUST BEYOND LEBANESE CUSTOMS/ IMMIGRATION CHECKPOINT. AFTER EXCHANGE, TWO DRIVERS PROCEEDED TO ZAHLE TO MAKE INQUIRIES CONCERNING AVAILABILITY OF REUSABLE BORDER CROSSING PERMITS. THEY WERE INFORMED THAT PERMITS WERE AVAILABLE ONLY ON A ONE-DAY BASIS AND THAT THEY MUST BE USED ON DAY ISSUED. EMBASSY DRIVER GAINED IMPRESSION THAT ALTHOUGH IT WOULD BE TIME-CONSUMING (ONE HOUR), THEY WOULD HAVE NO PROBLEMS OBTAINING SUCH A PERMIT. DRIVERS INFORMED THAT PERMIT FOR RETURN TO LEBANON MUST BE SECURED FROM SYRIAN AUTHORITIES IN DAMASCUS. WOULD APPRECIATE EMBASSY DAMASCUS DETERMINING WHERE AND HOW SUCH RETURN PERMIT IS ISSUED.

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3. ON RETURN TRIP, DRIVERS ENCOUNTERED SOME

DIFFICULTIES WITH SYRIAN-MANNED ROADBLOCKS BETWEEN CHTAURA AND SOFAR. THESE ROADBLOCKS DEMANDED THAT THE POUCHES BE OPENED FOR INSPECTION. ALTHOUGH IT REQUIRED SOME ARGUMENT AND DISCUSSION, DRIVERS WERE ABLE TO DISSUADE THESE INDIVIDUALS FROM INSPECTING THE POUCHES. SAME PROBLEM AROSE WITH JUNBLATTI/DRUZE ROADBLOCK APPROXIMATELY TWO KILOMETERS BEYOND SOFAR. THIS ROADBLOCK, WHICH REPORTEDLY INCLUDED SYRIAN CAPTAIN WHO HAD DEFECTED TO LEBANESE LEFTISTS, INSISTED THAT BAGS BE OPENED. AFTER PERMITTING SYRIAN TO INSPECT ONE BAG WITHOUT OPENING IT, DRIVERS WERE PERMITTED TO PROCEED TO BEIRUT WITHOUT FURTHER INCIDENT.

4. ROAD CONDITIONS WERE GENERALLY VERY POOR, AND DRIVERS WERE REQUIRED TO GO OFF MAIN ROADS TO AVOID WORST SECTIONS OF THE ROAD. THEY ENCOUNTERED NO FIGHTING DURING ENTIRE TRIP.

5. IT IS NOT KNOWN WHAT DIFFICULTIES THEY WILL ENCOUNTER WHEN ACTUALLY CROSSING THE BORDER WITH POUCHES IN VIEW OF DIFFICULTIES WITH SYRIAN BLOCKS IN LEBANON. IT MAY BE BENEFICIAL ON FIRST FULL RUN TO DAMASCUS FOR AMEMBASSY DAMASCUS EMPLOYEE TO MEET AND ASSIST THROUGH THE BORDER FORMALITIES AND ACCOMPANY TO DAMASCUS.

6. IN SUMMARY, OUR REQUEST TO HAVE GOVERNOR OF BEKAA (LAHOUD) ISSUE REUSABLE BORDER TRANSIT PERMIT WAS DENIED, BUT WE BELIEVE REGULAR POUCH RUN CAN BE ACCOMMODATED BY HAVING DRIVER PICK UP DAILY PASS AT ZAHLE AND CONTINUE TO DAMASCUS, THEN RETURN TO BEIRUT WITH PERMIT ISSUED IN DAMASCUS.

7. YOUR COMMENTS WOULD BE APPRECIATED.
HUNT

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